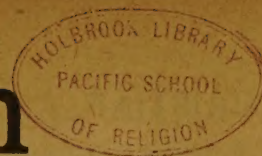


# The Christian News-Letter

Edited by  
J. H. OLDHAM



No. 88

JULY 1ST, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

The Prime Minister did well to begin his broadcast on the German attack on Russia by denouncing the cynical disregard of solemn treaties and of the customary steps preceding a declaration of war. We dare not get used to these things. Trust and good faith are the cement by which society is held together. Public opinion has endorsed the Prime Minister's declaration that everyone who fights against the Nazi unprecedented claim to unlimited power is our ally. It is none the less true that the participation of Russia brings a new confusion into the issues of the war. Between the Nazi creed and the European tradition, of which the allies are the professed champions, the gulf is plain. But Russian Communism, while it presents a moral challenge to the democracies in respect of the unjust social privileges which persist in them, has at the same time revealed features hardly distinguishable from the merciless and inhuman tyranny of Nazism, and openly repudiates the religious source and sanction of the best in Western civilization. There are opportunities as well as dangers in the new political alignment, but the prevailing spiritual chaos calls strongly for a body of people who are learning together what it is that they are prepared to hold to at all costs, and are resolved to steer their course by it. The substance of this week's Supplement was written before the news of the German invasion of Russia, but the urgency of the issue it raises is enhanced by that momentous event.

I am not so presumptuous as to suppose that what is said in the Supplement fulfils the conditions stated in its opening paragraph. The most that I can hope for is that it points in the right direction. Having tried in recent years to listen to what diverse minds, formed by different traditions and experiences, are teaching us, and to see what they are seeing, I have a growing sense that the main issues are becoming clearer. More surely, perhaps, than we are yet fully aware, we are being led along various paths to what is simple and central and has power to save us.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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## **THE PREDICAMENT OF SOCIETY AND THE WAY OUT. II.**

The problem proposed in the last Supplement was whether it is possible to define a faith and purpose which can unite those who share it in a common resistance to the dangers by which the life of man to-day is menaced. A valid answer to this question must be one that, when it is understood, has the self-evident simplicity of ultimate truth. It must be directly related to the actual situation. It must express a total attitude to the whole of life. It must be something not that we possess and use but that commands and possesses us.

I have suggested that our fundamental need is for a faith that can inform and direct our purposes. What many are seeking is a programme. If we begin with programmes we quickly become bogged in the complexities of modern society; and all too soon we come up against barriers which our present spiritual resources are insufficient to surmount. What a faith gives us is not a clear picture of a defined goal but a firm conviction about what really matters, from which we act in every situation.

The key thought in what follows is that the faith that can restore society to health is a renewed faith in the simple and primary realities of human existence, and that to such a faith we are being recalled through our present predicament.

The realities which condition man's life do not change. To recall them is not to say anything new or startling. The real difficulty is that men have for so long lost their hold on these elementary truths that their meaning has to a large extent leaked away. We talk about them; we think we understand them. But the words we use about them are empty

and unconvincing. A cripple can form only a faint picture of what it means to run and jump and climb. We are not alive enough to pour meaning into what we say.

The fatal thing would be if, when these realities are mentioned, readers should say, "Yes, of course, that is what I believe." It would be fatal, because it is obvious that what we at present believe has little effect on the world. If we do believe, and that is all the result it has, the position is indeed hopeless. But if we were suddenly to awaken to the fact that these things are true but that we do not believe and act on them, something might begin to happen.

We are on a false track, therefore, if we are looking for something new to say. Society cannot be saved by words, nor by ideas received and communicated at a merely intellectual level. Our task is the far more difficult one of rediscovering in experience and action a meaning that has been lost. The elemental realities of existence must enter into and possess our entire being, so that they exert their power not through what we say but through what we are.

What then are the ultimate realities which constitute and condition the life of man? They may be described in many different terms, but substantially they would seem to be five.

### **(1) GOD**

On the very threshold we are met by the difficulty that the key words have lost their meaning and even become a barrier to understanding. We know that our hope is in God. Yet in most men the mention of Him stirs no emotional response. They do not



find in the thought liberation and exhilaration. They do not know how to believe in God; even when they have the will, they cannot. "I ceased to believe in God," writes a warm friend of the Christian News-Letter, "when I discovered that there was nothing at the other end of the telephone." The Church has lost the word of power. That is where we must start.

I have been advised, in view of this genuine perplexity, not to begin with God. But where else can one begin? What hope is there that man can master the vast impersonal forces which threaten his humanity, unless he may believe that he is related as person to a personal Being, through trust in Whom he may achieve the ends of his existence? How can he have courage to withstand the almost unlimited power which modern technical advance has placed within the reach of ambitious men, unless he is justified in believing that there is at work in history a power of the Spirit stronger than material might and any form of human power? Only the faith that he has been made to carry out God's purposes can invest his little life with dignity and worth.

Because God is, there is an absolute truth and absolute right, in surrender to which men can rise to undreamed of heights. If truth and right are of man's making, he may identify them, as men do to-day, with the particular interests of a class or nation. No one can doubt in view of what is happening that the soul of man is open to invasion by dark and destructive forces from below. The outlook would indeed be dark if, besides these powers which drag him downwards, there were not also a power enabling him to rise. To believe in God as living Spirit is to know that redeeming and renewing influences can reach us from above. This faith can provide a vitalism more dynamic than the vitalism of soil and blood. It restores courage and hope.

"What you mean by the first point in your paper," writes one of the critics to whom a draft was submitted, "is personal religion." That is not what I mean. God must indeed be apprehended in personal experience, but

it is not a subjective experience that I have chiefly in mind. To believe in God is not simply to acknowledge Him as the ruler and helper of our individual lives. It is to believe in Him as the Lord of history, at work in the world as well as in the Church, bringing new illumination to men's minds and infusing fresh moral and spiritual energies into a moribund society.

I do not pretend that this is an easy faith. "I am not *sure*," writes one of my friends, "that there is a power in history stronger than material might. But I try to believe it; and indeed I must believe it. At any rate I believe it enough to be willing to take the risk." Some would wish for—may themselves possess—a more assured and confident faith; they would like the trumpet to give forth a more certain sound. But the frank acknowledgment of our predicament, the recognition that we have strayed far from God and are poor in spirit, is the first step to the recovery of a strong and living faith.

## (2) NATURE

However difficult it may be to believe in God, we have no doubt about the reality of the physical world. Yet a false relation to this world, which we think we know and understand, may lie at the root of our spiritual difficulties. One of the first steps towards the salvation of society may be a change of attitude towards physical reality. It may seem strange to speak of salvation in this context, since salvation, it may be supposed, has to do with men's souls. But the bare fact that the human spirit inhabits a physical body and that man through his body is bound to the material earth has inexhaustible significance. If men interpret this fact wrongly, they become involved in fundamental error. They are estranged from God by a false relation to the world which He has created.

This has, in fact, happened. Instead of looking on the earth and the world of natural objects as gifts to man, to be understood, valued and reverently used, men have regarded them as just so much raw material for the satisfaction of their unlimited wants. Science, which is the child of humility and



reverence, has been made the tool of man's pride and ambition. The reckless and ruinous exploitation of natural resources is but one manifestation of this arrogant temper. In a world that is centred on markets and exchange everything tends to be thought of as a commodity. Natural objects, and even persons, are all included in this category. A tree is seen not as a tree but as timber.

It is not easy to think of anything that would more deeply transform the temper, and as a result the activities, of our society, than a recovery of the spirit of reverence towards nature and material things. It would bring a new delight in the distinctive qualities of things and in the craftsmanship that takes account of these. It would save us from the vain attempt to force nature to submit to our arbitrary demands, and by reminding us of our dependence bring about a new harmony between man and his natural environment. We should recognize how vital is the necessity of establishing the right relation between our machine civilization and the primary products of the earth on which man depends for his existence. In responding reverently to the truth of material things men may discover that without having known it they are in touch with God who made them.

### (3) PERSONS

In an age dominated by science, which deals with objects, and with persons only so far as they can be treated as objects, it is well to remind ourselves that the texture of our experience is determined more deeply by our relation to persons than by our relation to things. In infancy we respond to the presence and touch of our mother before we are conscious of things extended in space; and when we look back on life at its close, it is the people whom we have known and loved, far more than our possessions or the works of our hands, that give it significance. What makes life worth living is the mutual enrichment of persons through understanding intelligence and love.

If the reality of human experience is persons in communion with one another, we

see how complete a denial of that reality is the individualism which has characterised the life and thought of recent centuries—not only in its selfish manifestations but also in its ideals and aspirations. Assertions that "man has an individuality to be preserved" and that what we must seek is "the fullest development and expression of the personality," are valid as a protest against unjust limitations of man's growth and freedom. But to isolate the individual from the context of mutual dependence and mutual responsibility, in which alone he can become a person, is a disastrous perversion of the truth. We cannot be persons except in relation to other persons. M. Maritain goes to the root of things when he urges that what is needed to save civilization is to substitute for a democracy based on the isolated individual a democracy which draws its strength from persons living in community.

It is in groups of limited size, in which contacts with other persons are direct and real, that men can learn the meaning of their dependence on one another and of joint-responsibility for common tasks. Those who sing in choirs, for example, frequently discover that, while they may be incapable of singing a solo which would not be an offence to the ears, they are able in association with others to create what is beautiful; however little they may be interested in any theory or doctrine of man's dependence on his fellows, they become aware of the release through that dependence of latent creative forces within them. At the deepest level of religious experience, it is in the fellowship of the two or three who make contact with one another in a common awareness of God, that He makes Himself known. Those who have even a small experience of the strength which comes from human trust and friendship know that there are here vast untapped reservoirs of power.

The fact that the fundamental meaning of human life is found in the communion of persons is the ultimate answer to the problem of centralised power. However necessary for certain purposes, to exercise power over a person is to disregard for those pur-



poses his nature as a person. He is a person in virtue of his having a point of view, a right of responsible decision, as valid as our own. The relation of persons is one of mutual respect and toleration, in which each renounces any absolute claim to the final or decisive word. Power in society there must be, but in so far as society is conceived of as a community of persons, power will be exercised *for* men, and exercised *over* them only because it is exercised on their behalf. Since to be a person in communion with other persons is the essential nature of man, unlimited dictatorship must sooner or later be found to be intolerable; it must perish in the end by its inherent untruth. Faith in what man is, and was made to be, gives us the assurance that at whatever price of suffering and struggle the truth of his inalienable being will in the end triumph over the strongest concentrations of dictatorial power.

#### (4) SOCIETY

Life would be relatively simple if it consisted only of direct relations with persons and things. But we are related to persons and things not only directly but through the medium of a host of activities and a network of institutions, in which we are associated with others in an endless variety of ways. Some of these are natural communities, like the family and the nation. Others are voluntary associations which we join or leave at will. Other activities, such as those which we call economic, political and cultural, are the expression of impulses implanted in human nature, but take their present form from the purposes and choices of men. Through these various forms of community and these corporate activities we are linked in a continuous chain with the generations before and after us. Tradition is a major determining factor in our lives.

I have opened up in one paragraph questions which the News-Letter could not cover adequately in the next ten years. But what is relevant to the purpose of this paper can be put briefly.

First, the organization of these manifold social activities has become in our day, in

contrast with earlier societies, so vast and intricate as to bring about a crisis in the life of mankind. A *radical* change is taking place in the conditions of human existence, and it is in that fact that all our problems centre.

Secondly, these various forms of human association, which make up society and which through the centuries have acquired a rigid and unyielding character, have been given their present shape by a multitude of choices in the past, many of which may have been false or mistaken. The principles that govern their working are consequently *ambiguous* in meaning. We cannot identify what *is* with the will of God. Many people to-day are increasingly alive to the deep truth in the doctrine that what has been built into history by the labours of past generations is not something to be lightly thrown away, but by the very fact of its existence has a claim on our loyalty. But this truth has to be balanced by the other that into whatever is built by sinful men there enters an element of injustice, and that consequently much that exists has got to be changed.

Thirdly, what concerns us in the context of this paper is that, notwithstanding all this, these common activities belong to the texture of human life created by God. It is through this dependence of men on one another in a community that we are able to develop our full human potentialities. These common activities are the sphere in which according to God's purpose we serve Him on earth. We have no right to despair of the public good. A reawakened sense of the common life as the sphere in which God's will must be done, the opening of our eyes to the spiritual significance of the British tradition of public service, local initiative and voluntary effort, evoking the resolve to build new social structures on foundations already given, would infuse fresh energies into the body politic and crown our resistance to tyranny with positive meaning and achievement from which the whole world would benefit.

#### (5) CHRIST

The realities we have considered thus far condition the life of every man, and all men are, or may be, aware of them. Of Christ



they cannot know until they have been told. A century ago the majority of men had never heard of Him; through the remarkable missionary movement of the nineteenth century He has become a living force in the life of the peoples of Asia and Africa as well as of the western world.

But in Europe, at least, He is a reality from which no life can escape. Even if there are those who have never heard His name or who vehemently repudiate Him, He none the less meets them in the civilization which bears His impress. The Nazis cannot get rid of Him. The Church conflict has been one of the major factors with which the Nazi movement has had to reckon in its rise to power; it has been universally recognized as "news." In the west to-day men may ignore, but they cannot escape from, Christ. They may, if they will, return to paganism. But it cannot be the old paganism, but only the more terrible state of a paganism which has known and rejected Christ.

To those who believe in Him, Christ is the centre of history. From Him all history takes its meaning. He is the inaugurator of a new order. It is a plain fact of history that the world has been different since He came; it can never be the same again. His coming brought into human life a spiritual energy of unparalleled power. He came to save mankind from its helplessness and hopelessness and sin. Once for all He met the power of evil and overcame it in His Cross and Resurrection. To those who believe, the ultimate reality of their existence is their relation to Christ.

But Christ is not only the inaugurator of a new order but also the attestation and final sanction of those elemental realities of human existence of which we have already spoken. Since these are the environment of the life of every man, many who do not call themselves Christians have an understanding of them—often a deeper understanding than that of many professing Christians. But for those who believe in Christ He is the ground and assurance of their belief in God, in persons, in truth, in the life and purposes of society.

## THE ADVERSARY

The fear that has haunted me in writing this paper has been that it is all too obvious, easy and soothing. We can be saved from this snare only by the knowledge that every article of the faith that has been outlined is denied by the direction in which society is moving as well as by the loud proclamation of contrary doctrines. We can keep our faith only by fighting for it.

This fact in its turn brings a certain simplification. Life is full of perplexities for the intellect. But in its essence it is decision and fidelity. Marxism has done a service in helping to bring back into men's consciousness the truth that life is essentially conflict. The view of life as an unceasing, peaceful progress of harmonious elements is seen to be an illusion. The writers of the New Testament see life as a warfare between the Kingdom of God and the powers of evil. Faith is a call to battle; it is the victory which overcomes the world. We prove our faith by sallying out to meet the enemy; we discover its meaning in putting it to the test.

Like the present war, the spiritual conflict has to be waged simultaneously on several fronts.

It has been contended in this and the preceding Supplement that a fundamental change is taking place in the structure of society. The grave danger is that its structure may assume a shape in which there will be no place for the freedom and responsibility of the human person and the free intellectual and spiritual communication of persons with one another. Whether it does assume such a shape is an issue that has to be fought out in the political field. But the issue which has just been stated is not simply a political issue. It is also a religious issue; the whole Christian understanding of life is involved.

This perception has momentous consequences. If the major political issue of our day is at the same time a religious issue, religion may become in an altogether new degree re-united with life. Men may discover afresh its direct relevance to their fundamental need.



It is incumbent on those who hold the Christian faith to unite their forces to ensure that the issue is decided in the sense that their faith demands. They must set themselves to discover the point or points at which the issue may be, in fact, decided, and attack the enemy at these points. The essential thing is not to draw out abstract schemes on paper but to see the direction which the forces at work in society are taking, and where things are most likely to go wrong, and to launch an attack at that point; to discover where the devil has established his seat and to assail him with all our might.

It is evident, for example, that a chief concentration of the power of evil in modern society is the fact of unemployment, leading to the decay and destruction of men's bodies and souls. The Report on *The Young Adult in South Wales*, to which reference was made in a recent News-Letter, shows how men in the prime of their manhood may be deprived of all faith and hope and reduced by their treatment by society to a state of fatalism and cynicism. If the faith of which we have been speaking really possessed us, we should rise up and say that these things shall no longer be; that at whatever cost this tragedy of human lives shall be brought to an end.

When we address our minds to the condition of the young adult we discover at once that the trouble has its root in earlier years. It arises from our shameful neglect of our adolescent population. When we ask what steps may be taken to remedy this neglect, we shall find ourselves confronted by obstacles arising from the present economic structure of society. If we attack with determination at a single point we shall find the battle opening up along the whole front.

The full meaning of the faith of which we have been speaking will be disclosed only in resolute resistance to the forces which deny it. Why, then, it may be asked, does not the Christian News-Letter launch and lead an attack? That is what we want to do. But an attack on the structure of society at the points where it denies our faith, in order to be successful, must be made with adequate knowledge, equipment and personnel. The

war is teaching us some elementary lessons. An overwhelming desire to aid the Greeks and a decision to send what reinforcements we could were of no avail to defeat the enemy, when the supply of aircraft, tanks and shipping was insufficient. A thorough mastery of the complex problems of modern society is essential, if an effective attempt is to be made to deal with them.

It is because I have for long been sensible of the relative feebleness and ineffectiveness of Christian effort in face of the modern Leviathan that I have been driven to ask the question how there might come into existence a force comparable in energy to the Communist and Nazi movements. I do not see what can bring such a force into existence except the compulsion of a living faith, strong enough to break through our inhibitions, overcome our reluctances and teach us to laugh at obstacles. To move forward we need a body of men and women of the highest quality who, fired by such a faith and ready to bank their lives on it, set themselves to discover together how to implement it in action.

There is a second front on which immediate action can be taken by all who are ready to act. To achieve the kind of society we seek it is necessary not only to have the right national policy but to strengthen and increase the multitude of lesser centres, in which men learn in a limited and manageable area the meaning of responsibility and the potentialities of common action. Strong foundations for such an effort already exist among us in the various activities of local government, the vigorous institutions developed by the working-classes, the work of voluntary societies of many kinds and the neighbourhood and communal activities that have sprung into existence to meet the needs of war time.

A third battle front of vital importance is in the souls of men. We cannot, if we are Christians, locate evil, as many do, in some wicked opponent, whether an individual or a class or a nation. It has its seat in our own hearts, and we ourselves are centres from which the contagion spreads. In our national



life, it is not easy to strike a true balance between the positive and negative elements. But the evidence is inescapable that there are multitudes without a purpose in life, irresponsible, self-indulgent, self-seeking. From such unsocial elements a democratic society cannot be formed. It is extraordinary with what lack of realism we indulge our fancies in drawing up schemes on paper for a better social or international order without facing the question of the kind of people by whom they have to be worked. To save society we have to begin by saving persons. Nothing can supersede, or take the place of, the evangelistic and pastoral ministries of the Church, reinforced by the insights that general and medical psychology can supply.

Besides the distinctively Christian contribution to the national life, the nation needs a doctrine of the true nature of man and society. Without such a social philosophy there is little hope for society or for education; both must lack a sense of direction. Education must degenerate into a number of particular techniques held together by no coherent view of life. The absence of a unifying social philosophy in education was not too serious, so long as a firm social tradition, unconsciously transmitted, compensated for the lack. But once the tradition has begun to disintegrate, it can be replaced only by a conscious purpose. Democracy cannot successfully resist the totalitarian danger and the dominance of secular or pagan ideas by a merely negative attitude; it must have a positive faith and doctrine of its own. There must be certain basic democratic principles and virtues which, if it does not impose, it at least uses all the resources of education and persuasion to inculcate—not so much by formal instruction as by creating the situations in which they are practised and learned. We cannot claim in our present mixed society that this indispensable social philosophy should be specifically Christian; we *can* strive as Christians to ensure that it is imbued as far as possible with the Christian understanding of the true ends of life.

Since the subject of this paper is the pre-

dicament of society as a whole, I have tried to distinguish between the specific task of the Church and those convictions about the realities of human existence, which for Christians derive their authority and full meaning from Christ, but which as belonging to the texture of all human life may be expected to gain the assent of many who do not profess themselves Christians.

#### THE POWER OF FAITH

I have suggested that a movement powerful enough to turn in a new direction the tides of history might spring from a renewed faith in the simple realities which environ and constitute human life—faith in God, in the truth of things, in the reality and communion of persons, in the responsibilities of society, and in Christ the cornerstone. To put our trust in these objective realities is to pass beyond what is merely individual and subjective, and to allow ourselves to be commanded by reality. It is not utopian to say that such a faith has power to change the course of history, because history is shaped by what men fundamentally believe about themselves and the world in which they live. The faith of which we have spoken is wholly contrary to the existing systems and practices of society, and is bound, therefore, in the degree that it takes possession of men's minds and is acted on, to undermine and ultimately overthrow them. Faith in the commanding and inescapable realities of man's life is, moreover, the one bond that can create a unity among men founded not on compulsion but on inward assent.

The thought of this paper has been focussed not on what ought to be but on what *is*. It is not insistence on ideals but a new perception of reality that has power to release fresh energies. We have been speaking not of a responsibility which we have to carry but of a power which carries us. Our sole responsibility is not to put obstacles in the way of that power. It is not our feeble efforts on which we have to rely to overcome the evils of society but the unsleeping power of what is divine in the world working in and through us in the measure that we let it.